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## "Así" as a resource for cohesion in casual conversation

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PRESENTACIÓN

**‘ASÍ’ AS A RESOURCE FOR COHESION IN CASUAL CONVERSATION**

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**RESUMEN**

This presentation is part of a research project about “Cohesion and coherence in casual conversation” that is being developed at the University of La Plata by the Group ECLAR (El Español de Chile y Argentina). The aim of this work is to analyze the meanings and functions of the expression “así” (like this) frequently used in informal talk, and to confirm or refute the hypothesis that it contributes to the cohesion of conversation in different ways. The corpus used is formed by 55 conversations between university students of 18 to 25 years of age, and who hold a close relationship among themselves in most cases. The principles of the Systemic Functional Linguistics were taken as a point of departure; descriptions of the meanings of the item in Spanish grammars and in writings about vague language also constituted basic bibliography. A local analysis of the occurrences of the term in context was carried out with the help of interpretation and comparison techniques. The results obtained showed that “así” establishes internal references as much as external references in a text, in which case we would like to highlight the importance of the speaker’s assessment who, when choosing a form of expression, presupposes certain cognitive abilities of his interlocutor and a shared world with him. Besides finding occurrences of the item which fulfill functions already described in the literature on the subject –expressing consecutive meaning among other semantic values– this study revealed other functions that the item can perform in relation to the discourse values it can express, such as filler and marker of end of topic, among others, which can complement the existing descriptions.

Di Tullio (1997: 160-161) describes a group of lexical units called ‘pro-forms’ (pro-verbs such as *hacerlo* (‘do it’), pro-clauses like *como si* (‘as if’)) that share some semantic properties: the lack of descriptive content and the occasional meaning. This means they have to be interpreted in relation to the situation and the discourse context. The group includes nouns, possessive and demonstrative adjectives and adverbials- where we place the expression under analysis *así* (‘like that’). She states that the non descriptive character of these expressions is linked to the kind of grammatical word, with a constrained lexical meaning, and that the occasional meaning is manifested in two typical uses: deictic and anaphoric.

The aim of this work is to analyze the meanings and functions of the expression '*así*' (*like this*) frequently used in informal talk, and to see how it contributes to the cohesion and coherence of conversation. This presentation is part of a recently started research project about "Cohesion and coherence in casual conversation" that is being developed at the University of La Plata by the Group ECLAR (El Español de Chile y Argentina). The corpus used is formed by 52 conversations between university students of 18 to 25 years of age, and who hold a close relationship among themselves in most cases. The principles of the Systemic Functional Linguistics were taken as a point of departure; descriptions of the meanings of the item in Spanish grammars and in writings about vague language also constituted basic bibliography. A local analysis of 255 occurrences of the term in context was carried out, with the help of interpretation and comparison techniques. Six representative cases are shown here.

## ANALYSIS

The results obtained showed that *así* establishes internal references as much as external references in a text. The successful use of this type of expressions demonstrates that "collaboration is an essential part of the referent, since its meaning depends critically on its context and the shared world between the participants" (Clark & Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986, in Jucker *et al.*, 2003: 1749).

We have found occurrences of *así* that help the organization of the discourse as a whole and, hence, contribute to the texture of the text, case #1 being one of them.

1. Mariquita is telling Paula about a bad day she had. She mentions, among other things, that she was late to work. Paula takes up this comment as a topic initiator

**Pa:** ¿Cómo te está yendo con las clases?

**Pa:** **How are your classes going?**

**Ma:** ¡Bárbaro!

**Ma:** **Great!**

**Pa:** [¿Sí?]

**Pa:** **[Really?]**

**Ma:** [Sí.]

**Ma:** **[Yes.]**

**Pa:** Buen, ¿Te está pagando la tipa?

**Pa:** **Fine. Is the woman paying you?**

**Ma:** Todavía no, no, me tiene que pagar, ahora, la semana que viene.

**Ma:** **Not yet, no. She has to pay me now, next week.**

**Pa:** ¡Ah, bueno, pero bien!

**Pa: Oh, well, that's great!**

**Ma: ¡Bien!**

**Ma: Good!**

Pa: Por lo menos.

**Ma: At least.**

**Ma: La cosa era así,** era el cumpleaños de Carolina.

**Ma: The thing was like that, it was Carolina's birthday.**

Pa: Sí. ¡Ah, ah! ¡Pará!

**Pa: Right. Oh, oh! Hold on!**

**Ma: ¡Calláte que... !**

**Ma: Hold on, that...!**

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This case could be taken as an instance of cataphoric reference that could be paraphrased as 'things were as I'm going to tell you right now'. According to the types of reference expressions stated in Halliday & Matthiensen (2004) it would be a case of comparative identity reference. Paula intends to know about Mariquita's job but her friend is not interested in developing that topic, so she downgrades it and sets what Wilson (1989) considers as one of the two major topic initiating strategies: the placement of a statement in a position of non retrospective relation. Mariquita wants to install the topic of Caro's birthday. By using the phrase *la cosa era así* ('the thing was like this') Mariquita positions herself as the teller of a story and, probably, sets her expectation of not being interrupted.

We also find cases in which the speaker signals, by the use of *así* ('like that'), that some details will be left out- such as fragments #2 and 3.

2. Augusto is telling Lucrecia what happened while he was on his way to refill his bottle of Coke while Lucrecia was waiting for him at the queue of the cinema, minutes before the film started

**A: ... Entonces ahí me arrodillé, la Coca a todo esto estaba batida porque se me había caído.**

**A: Then I kneeled down. The Coke was all shaken up, because I'd dropped it.**

L: Uuhh.

**L: Oh.**

**A: Entonces mientras que iba caminando la iba abriendo sshh, cuando se llenaba la le paraba, osea... [la volvía a cerrar].**

**A: So while I was walking I opened it sshh, I stopped it when it filled up, that is... [I closed it again].**

L: [Claro la volvías a cerrar.]

L: [Right, you closed it again.]

A: **Y así** bueno hasta que finalmente la pude, la pude abrir y cuando llegue ahí...

A: **Like that, well, until I could finally, I could open it and when I got there...**

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This is, again, a case of comparative reference. In this fragment, *y así* ('and like that') shows that the action is repeated more than once: Augusto tried to open the bottle and had to close it repeatedly to prevent the liquid to be spilled. At the same time, this use of anaphoric reference of *así* indicates the listener that the narrative has been shortened, precisely, to avoid the reiteration of information.

Fragment # 3 shows a similar instance in which, by means of the analyzed expression, some part of the recount is summarized in the narrative, creating acceleration (Genette, 1998).

3. Marcelo is telling Francisco about a summer job he had during his holidays

M: Estaba laburando en Teletransformer. Recibí llamadas de Estados Unidos al laburo que el mismo laburo de Ale pero para la empresa del computadoras de allá. Me llaman, un... una truchada, malísimo. O sea te llama un flaco y te dice bueno compré una computadora hace 5 días y el software de la computadora no me anda bien. Que lástima me va a tener que pagar 99 dólares para que te solucione xxx para todo el año. Era mentira encima. Y el servicio era espectacular, lo vendíamos nosotros como si fuera espectacular, y lo transferíamos a un chino, un indio viste? la india cualquiera, y un montón se quejaban. Bueno pagaban bien, eh 900 mangos por mes, llegue a sacar 1100 y... [Bueno osea.]

M: **I was working for Teletransformer. You get calls from the US, which is the same as Ale's job but for the computer business there. They call me, it was just... lame, really bad. I mean, a guy calls you and tells you, well, I bought a computer five days ago and the software is not working well. So sorry, you'll have to pay me US\$ 99 to solve xxx for the whole year. And it was a lie. And the service was fantastic, we sold it as if it was fantastic, and we put him through with a Chinese guy, an Indian guy, you know? India. Whatever. And tons of people complained. Anyway, they pay was OK, er... 900 a month, I even managed to get 1100 and...[well, anyways...]**

F: [O sea a full.]

F: **[So, great.]**

M: No nueve horas, no tenía vida. Era de las 5 de la tarde hasta las 2 de la mañana. Llegaba a mi casa [xxx].

M: **No, 9 hours, I had no life. It was from 5 pm to 2 am. I got home [xxx].**

F:[xxx]

F: [xxx]

M: Si era 60, 60 llamadas por día que era decir siempre lo mismo, verificar los datos del tipo, venderle **y así** con todo el cuentito. Ya a los dos meses ya no quería saber nada y llegaba de 5 de la tarde a 2 de la mañana y no me iba a dormir a las 2 de la mañana.

M: Yes, there were 60, 60 calls a day, and it was to say always the same thing, verify the guy's information, sell him something and so on, with the whole little story. After two months, well, I didn't want anything to do with it, and I got home after working from 5 to 2 and I didn't go to bed at 2 am.

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This use also signals repetition –reinforced by the term *cuentito*, ('little story')– and also reduces the narration in length. The purpose seems to be different, though, to that established for the previous case (#2). We can think of two reasons for Marcelo's strong assumptions about his partner's ability to use common ground<sup>1</sup> to recover the missing information. Firstly, because the speaker's activity was done after that of a friend in common of the interlocutors. Talking about his job Marcelo says *el mismo laburo de Ale pero para la empresa de computadoras* ('the same as Ale's job but for the computer business'). Thus, he might think his listener could relate this information to what he is saying in order to understand the omitted details. Another possible explanation could be that, although he has not provided a description directly related to what *todo el cuentito* ('the whole little story') means, he has given other details about the job that he could think might be sufficient for his interlocutor to infer the kind of activity he was involved in.

Apart from the reasons that lead the speakers to omit information in cases 2 and 3, the inference or interpretation process is different in each of these instances because the degree of opacity varies between them: the source of interpretation of the implicit encoding device *así* can be found in the immediate context in case 2, whereas in case 3 it lies outside the co-text- it is exophoric- so, as Halliday & Hasan (1985:76) state, the link created by the device between the text and its context is opaque.

Jefferson (1990) analyzes three part list constructions and talks about *generalized list completers*. Although the list in which the expression under analysis appears has more than three members, we believe this last use of *y así* ('and like that') could be taken as a *generalized list completer*. *Y así con todo el cuentito* ('And so on with the whole little story') closes the series but not the turn the speaker wants to hold. Once more, this constitutes a case of comparative identity reference.

<sup>1</sup> We take the notion of 'common ground' from Jucker & Smith (1996: 2) 'to refer to those assumptions which are entertained by both partners in a conversation and which they assume to be so shared'.

Overstreet (2005: 1847) describes *general extenders* as typical expressions at the end of a phrase or clause –such as *y cosas así* ('and things like that')– that extend utterances already complete and are not specific in their reference. This last occurrence of *así* can be also interpreted in this way. There is addition but also a relation of sufficiency: it is not necessary to say anything else bearing in mind what has been expressed before. And the reference of the expression will strongly depend on the allocation of a referent on the part of the listener. The speaker takes for granted that the information is public –shared with his interlocutor– and not private– held only by himself.

Another case in which meaning making relies heavily on the presumed knowledge between the interlocutors and the interpretation of the listener is stated under # 4.

4. Luz, Cecilia and Valeria are organizing dinner and Cecilia is, at the same time, talking to her boyfriend on the phone

Lu: [¡El hambre que tengo!]

Lu: [I'm so hungry! ]

Ce: ... Pedite algo,[ ahí en la heladera...] Habla por teléfono celular.

Ce: ...Order something, [there, on the fridge] She's speaks on her cell phone.

Va: [Ahh, xxx.]

Va: [Ah, xxx.]

Ce: ... hay para pedir unas empanadas algo así, eh?

Ce: We have to order "empanadas" (pastries), something like that, ok?

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On the basis of the main function she attributes to expressions like these, Channel (1994) calls them *vague category identifiers*. She claims the structure of these expressions consists of two parts, an exemplar and a vague tag, respectively *empanadas* ('pastries') and *algo así* ('something like that') in the above example. Overstreet y Yule (2002) have considered as the main function of forms of endings of enumerative series characteristics that may be applied to this form as well: to think of additional members of the same category or group as some of the members that precede it- in this case, *empanadas* ('pastries'). Cortez Rodrigues (2006b) states that, because of what has been said before, these forms produce a specialization of meaning. This thus, orients the listener on the kind of referent he/she has to associate with the vague expression used- pastries or pizza, for example, in this fragment. This is a case of comparative similarity reference, as well as the one that follows.



5. Alejandro is telling Guillermina about some complications with local currency he and his friends had on a trip abroad

A: No porque teníamos la tarjeta de Axel que nos había funcionado.

A: No, because we had Axel's card, which had worked.

G: Aahh.

G: Oh.

A: Nos funcionó en todo Argentina, nos cruzamos a Brasil y nos funcionó una vez creo, en Puerto Iguazú, y con eso bueno pagamos el pasaje, en Puerto Iguazú... y empezamos a caminar, a buscar cajero y no nos funcionaba, y no nos funcionaba, y bueno, nos quedamos una hora allá y salía el.. el..

A: It worked all around Argentina, we crossed to Brazil and it worked once, I think, in Puerto Iguazú, and we paid the ticket in Puerto Iguazú with it... and we started to walk, look for an ATM and it wouldn't work, and well, we stayed there for an hour and we'd miss the ...

G: el [micro.]

G: the [bus.]

A: [El colectivo.]

A: [The coach.]

G: Sí.

G: Yes.

A: Y le digo bueno no importa dale vamos, juntamos moneditas ahí, xxx pagamos el colectivo para llegar a la terminal, lo pagamos con 3 reales y 5 pesos, una cosa así creo, con todas las moneditas que habíamos encontrado.

A: And I say, well, it doesn't matter, come on, let's go, we collected small change there, xxx paid for the bus to the bus station, we paid it with 3 reales and 5 pesos, something of the sort, I think, with all the coins we'd found.

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In Cortez Rodrigues' terms (2006a), this expression can be considered a *mitigator of information* which signals that, in this case, the amount of money mentioned should not be taken as an exact number but as an approximation. This is another occurrence of comparative similarity reference.

The last case of our analysis is representative of many found in the corpus and can have, in our opinion, more than one interpretation.

6. Laura and Román are negotiating the identity of a friend of one of the speakers

La: Vos sabés que, ¿viste Romina? mi amiga, la ubicás, una que es toda así, calladita, blanquita.



**La:** You know what, remember Romina? My friend? Do you know who? The one that's all like this, quiet, with a pale complexion.

**Ro:** Chucky.

**Ro:** Chucky.

**La:** No esa es Cecilia, la petisita morocha.

**La:** No, that's Cecilia, the little short brunette.

**Ro:** Ah.

**Ro:** Right.

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This use of *así* ('like that') seems to be that of a pause filler that gives the speaker some time to think of which words to use, to describe the person she is talking about. She might have a notion in his mind and needs to think of how to express it better. Under this interpretation, it would not have a referential function and would not contribute to the content of the message. On the other hand, interpreted as a case of anaphoric comparative identity reference, it would correspond to a function mentioned in the *Nueva Gramática de la Lengua Española* (page 1.619): that of anticipating attributes.

#### FINAL REMARKS

We have analyzed 255 cases of reference that involve the expression *así* ('like that') in order to see how it contributes to the cohesion and coherence of conversations. We have presented here 6 instances that are representative of the corpus. They demonstrate that the term in question establishes internal references as much as external references in a text and realize comparative and similarity references. The first 3 cases highlight its interactive value that helps the hanging together of the conversation. *Así* ('like that') is used to introduce a topic in the conversation or close it, sometimes summing up part of an event, accelerating the narration. We have also seen cases of the item in question embedded in vague expressions but which are not pragmatically deviant and are of accessible reference. One of them fulfils a referential function, in Channel's terms (1994: 122) 'it directs the hearer to access a set, of which the given item is a member, whose characteristics will enable the hearer to identify the set'. It acts as an extender with a high interpersonal meaning. Overtreet & Yule (1997) and Overstreet (2005) describe extenders as intersubjectivity markers in the sense that they signal a supposition of interpersonal understanding, in spite of subjective differences.

The other case of vague language shows that the speaker believes it to be unnecessary to make some information salient and that the accuracy of the information given is irrelevant. The last instance presented might be ambiguous but has been included because of being one of many cases found in our corpus.

Taken as a single pause filler, it would not be worth mentioning in this paper, since it would not add content to the message expressed. However, analyzed as a case of reference, we find descriptions of this use in the existing literature.

In order to complete the analysis we will include cases of *así* ('like that') as a conjunctive, which, at first sight, seem to exemplify new uses of the expression in question. This will be the topic of future presentations.

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